

Corine Schleif and Volker Schier. *Katerina's Windows: Donation and Devotion, Art and Music, as Heard and Seen through the Writings of a Brigittine Nun.* University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2009. Pp. xlv + 579; ill. ISBN: 9780271033693.

The core of Corine Schleif and Volker Schier's *Katerina's Windows* is a group of letters written by Katerina Lemmel to her cousin Hans V Imhoff in the years between her entrance into the convent of Maria Mai in 1516 and his death in 1522. These letters are supplemented by additional correspondence, other primary sources, and extensive commentary by the two authors. The letters open windows, to use the authors' metaphor, both into and out from the convent as they cover topics ranging from personal, family, and monastic finances to family quarrels, monastic prayer practices, and practical aspects of the monastic life. The authors' commentary extends these views to encompass such topics as marriage arrangements, business practices, letter-writing conventions, and Brigittine architecture and liturgy. Their visual metaphor of the window is also given concrete form in the book's extensive illustrations.

The book's organization literally places the letters at its center as they occupy its third through eighth chapters. They are preceded by an introduction and chapters on Katerina's childhood and marriage and her entry into the monastic life, and followed by chapters on the Peasants' War of 1525 and its aftermath and a conclusion. Each chapter contains both primary source text and commentary with the two types of text distinguished by the use of different typefaces. The authors state that their goal in organizing the book in this way is to have one "reading simultaneously through two windows," that provided by Katerina's writings and by their own (xxvii). I was not convinced that this strategy was successful, however, for it led to repetition both between the letters and the commentary and within the commentary itself.

As well as extending the views opened by the letters through their commentary, the authors build a series of scholarly frames around these windows—to extend their metaphor slightly. The first such frame consists of scholarly understandings of female monasticism in the later Middle Ages. Simply put, did monasticism provide women with an escape from patriarchal society, allow them an autonomy not available outside convent walls, and even make it possible for them to attain power and authority? Or was the convent a dumping ground for patriarchy's unwanted women who were then condemned to pointless lives given over to "self-abnegation" and "self-dissolution" through private prayer and mysticism (484)? Katerina's letters make clear that, for her, the monastery

was the former, a positive option that she freely chose for herself and that allowed her to exercise both independence and influence. She entered Maria Mai despite opposition from her family and friends, nevertheless maintained contact with them through her correspondence, used her correspondence to maintain control over her finances, and gained influence within the convent because of her financial resources.

Nevertheless, the authors rightly point out that Katerina's experience was an individual's experience and should not be generalized to account for all medieval nuns. Indeed the fact that several members of the community at Maria Mai—both women and men—chose to leave in the turmoil caused by the peasants' uprising demonstrates that the monastic life did not have the same appeal for all. In reading the letters and other primary sources, I was struck by the degree to which Katerina stood apart from the community at Maria Mai: she often mentions herself and the community separately, as if holding herself apart; she is privileged in receiving food and drink when the other nuns lack sufficient sustenance; and she is the only nun to be mentioned by name in the account of the Peasants' War that is included in chapter nine, where she is mentioned several times. Her experience appears to me to have been not just individual, but exceptional.

A second scholarly frame assembled by the authors is work on women's roles in medieval artistic production. In explaining her interest in the project, Corine Schleif contests models of art history that emphasize the artist in favor of approaches focused on patrons, donors, and viewers—roles that were frequently occupied by women (xxv). This shift aligns her work with recent feminist approaches to medieval art history that respond to the emphasis on female agency in feminist art history, where that agency is typically identified with the work of female artists, by arguing for agency as enacted through patronage and viewership.¹ Katerina was an active patron at Maria Mai: she supported and oversaw a building project and took responsibility for the production of stained glass windows for the convent's cloister. She solicited donations of windows from family and friends, met with a master glazer to discuss the details of the project, and suggested its iconographic program. The authors' interest is in notions of reciprocity expressed in her solicitations of the windows: they will ensure that the nuns remember to pray for their donors and so repay the donors through their prayers, the return in prayers making the windows "a good investment" in Katerina's eyes (309).

I was particularly struck by Katerina's reactions to the windows as a viewer, for she was not entirely happy with them. She thought that some of the lions

in the coats of arms were not of a sufficiently “yellowy yellow,” and she did not think the windows uniformly fulfilled her goal of “arousing desire” in their viewers. She was particularly unhappy to see Christ depicted “like a fat priest” when she would have liked to see him “all wounded and bloody” (295–6, 301, 321–22). As the authors note, Katerina’s displeasure with the windows indicates the limitations of patronage as a form of agency, for she could not control the final products of her project. Her reactions also open metaphorical windows to the late medieval traditions of visual and affective piety that have received so much scholarly attention in recent years.

These two scholarly frames intersect, finally, as the authors position their work in relationship to scholarship on nuns and medieval art and, in particular, to Jeffrey Hamburger’s work on the subject. Unfortunately, the authors misrepresent Hamburger’s arguments. They state, for example, that his work is built upon oppositions between text and image, the intellectual and the material, the abstract and the concrete, male and female, whereas his scholarship makes clear his interest in contesting such oppositions and thinking instead about interactions and intersections (482).² Furthermore, their suggestion that his work his “voyeuristic” is unfounded, and their comparison of such work with “nunspoilation” pornography is outrageous (483, 490). Because they dismiss Hamburger’s work, the authors lose the opportunity to use it to contextualize Katerina’s letters by, for example, comparing them to contemporary letters on similar topics as discussed in his *Nuns as Artists*.³ It would have been more productive for these authors to conceive of their work as in conversation, rather than in competition or conflict, with Hamburger’s contributions to the field.

This problem with the framing, however, does not spoil the views that these authors have opened through this book. By making available Katerina’s letters and the other primary source documents, they have created new openings for scholarship into the future.

Marian Bleeke
Cleveland State University

NOTES

1. See for example Rachel Dressler, “Continuing the Discourse: Feminist Scholarship and the Study of Medieval Visual Culture,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 43.1 (Summer 2007): 19–20; and the essays in “Feminist Approaches to Medieval Art and Visual Culture: Past, Present, Future,” *Medieval Feminist Forum* 44.2 (Winter 2008): 49–143.

2. Jeffrey Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists: The Visual Culture of a Medieval Convent* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 94–96, 137, 144–45, 154, 164, 168–69, 180, 214, 220–21; and *The Visual and the Visionary* (New York: Zone Books), 18–19, 34, 79, 108–9, 124–25, 228–29, 467.
3. Hamburger, *Nuns as Artists*, 200–207.